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ABSTRACT

The Minnesota Legislature directed the Minnesota State Board of Education to set in rule the content and performance standards that public high school students must achieve in order to graduate. This information brief describes the history and current status of the High School Graduation Rule for public school students in Minnesota. The state's public schools will begin implementing the basic-standards tests in reading and math during the 1996-97 year; a writing test will be required the following year. The standards contain goal statements for what students should know and be able to do in specific content areas. Accompanying the information is a chart containing the 10 elements and 62 corresponding content standards that students must try to attain as part of the state's profile of learning. (Contains 9 end notes). (LMI)

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Information Brief

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The State's High School Graduation Rule

This information brief describes the history and current status of the High School Graduation Rule for public school students in the state of Minnesota.

The Minnesota Legislature directed the state Board of Education (the board) to set in rule the content and performance standards that public high school students must achieve in order to graduate. The standards contain goal statements for what students should know and be able to do in specific content areas. State officials are determining how to measure whether students attain the required standards, and establishing the level of performance for a "passing score." At a minimum, the assessments will classify students as having attained or not attained the graduation standards.

Accompanying this information brief is a chart containing the ten elements and 62 corresponding content standards that students must try to attain as part of the state's profile of learning.

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The State's Previous High School Graduation Rule

The state's previous high school graduation rule required students to complete a total of nine credits in core academic areas: four credits of English, one credit of math, one credit of science, and three credits of social studies.

A high school credit was defined as a Carnegie unit equal to five classes per week for one entire school year. Students had to complete a total of 20 credits during grades nine through twelve in order to graduate. The requirement of 20 total credits included credit offerings in elective areas. School districts could require additional course work for graduation; those with sufficient financial resources and college bound students often exceeded the state's minimum curricular requirements.

Critics of the credit-based rule argued that the rule contained graduation requirements that were too few in number and overly general, leaving school districts with too much discretion in determining curriculum offerings. The critics believed that students' mastery of particular subjects varied widely because of differences in students' interests and schools' curricular content, as well as disparities in revenue among school districts. They also thought that defining graduation requirements in terms of courses and credits based on time prevented schools from focusing on educational goals or preparing students to function in a competitive and complex society.

In 1992 efforts began to establish a new high school graduation rule.

In 1992, in an effort to make public education more accountable[1] by requiring students to demonstrate educational competency,[2] the Minnesota Legislature stated in session law its commitment to establishing a rigorous, results-oriented high school graduation rule for the state's public school students;[3] it codified the law the following year.[4] The legislature prohibited the board from describing "the delivery system, form of instruction, or a single statewide form of assessment that local sites must use" to meet rule requirements.

Between 1993 and 1995, the board considered various drafts of the two principle components of the proposed rule: the basic requirements, which represent areas of minimum knowledge and skills that each student must demonstrate to graduate;[5] and the profile of learning, which represents rigorous high standards that all students must work toward attaining.[6] The board also proposed a time line for implementing the rule that would phase in the basic requirements and the profile of learning over a period of several years and give students and educators time to adjust to each phase of the new rule.

In March 1996, as a first formal step in establishing more rigorous graduation standards, the board adopted in rule a requirement that public school students entering ninth grade beginning in the 1996-1997 school year and thereafter pass basic standards tests in reading and mathematics. Ideally, districts will give third and fifth grade students benchmark reading and mathematics tests to monitor students' early progress. As a second step, the board anticipates adopting shortly a basic standards test in written composition for students entering the tenth grade in the 1997-1998 school year and thereafter; ideally, districts will give fifth and eighth grade students benchmark writing tests to monitor students' early progress. The third and final step likely will see the board adopting the concepts and processes that comprise the profile of learning.

The State's Current High School Graduation Rule

The state's public schools will begin implementing the basic standards tests in reading and math in the 1996-1997 school year. The board is preparing to adopt another graduation rule requiring a writing test beginning in the 1997-1998 school year.

Public school students in grades eight, nine or ten must take the reading and math competency tests.

School districts decide in which grade to first test students and usually elect to test eighth grade students. Students unable to pass the tests in eighth grade must be tested again in ninth grade. School districts must develop an individual remediation program for any student who is unable to pass the tests by tenth grade.

The board is exploring the possibility of giving the writing test to tenth grade students, who may be better prepared than younger students to write a successful composition.

Students generally are tested once per year.

A twelfth grade student who fails a first opportunity in twelfth grade to pass the competency tests, but meets all other district graduation requirements by April 1, has a second testing opportunity and may take alternative tests. Although the state tests are given on a designated day only once per school year, districts may use alternative tests at any time during the school year to test students.

Flexibility in the scheduling of alternative tests allow districts to determine, among other things, whether transferring students require remediation. Transferring students are not

required to take the basic competency tests if the district from which the students are transferring verifies that the students already passed the tests.

The rule permits districts to make reasonable accommodations available to LEP and special education students.

If the accommodations alter students' level of passing, districts must note the altered level on the students' records.

- The **"pass-state"** designation means that the student achieved the state standard for a passing score. To receive this designation, the accommodation the student requests must not alter the required level of performance on the tests. Such accommodations include tests in Braille and reader assistance on mathematics tests.

- A **"pass-individual"** designation is included in an individual education plan (IEP) and means that the standard for the student's performance is altered. The local IEP team decides the student's appropriate performance level and may make passing at the state level the student's long-term IEP goal.[7]

- The **"pass-translate"** designation is available to LEP students who only require assistance in translating test directions or prompts on mathematics tests. The department received a federal grant to validate translations of the state-developed mathematics test into five languages—Laotian, Hmong, Cambodian, Vietnamese and Spanish. The purpose of the validation is to ensure that the psychometric aspects of the test haven't been compromised as a result of the translation.

- The **"exempt"** designation applies to special education students that local IEP teams determine are incapable of taking the tests or lack the necessary substantive preparation for taking the tests.

To accommodate LEP students, districts must establish a uniform process for determining whether LEP students test under standard conditions or require translations. LEP students for whom English has been their primary language for three or fewer years may be exempted from the test requirements.

Districts must prepare a "learning opportunity and remediation" plan for each tenth grade student who has not yet passed the competency tests.

Districts must submit to the Department of Children, Families and Learning (the department) a remediation and testing plan for all such students and designate an implementation coordinator to effect the plan. The plan must address areas of student failure at individual, building and

district levels. The department anticipates that remediation will involve refocusing the curriculum and a small number of program changes, but not lots of extra classes; many at-risk students already participate in special programs. The district's remediation and testing plan must complement an implementation manual that describes how the district will emphasize pre-kindergarten through eighth grade basic skills curriculum.

Although not required under the rule, the department is using federal grant money to examine how tests given to third and fifth grade students can be used to monitor student progress and to help teachers in deciding when remediation is appropriate. During the 1996-1997 school year, the department expects to test limited numbers of at-risk students to determine their eligibility for Title I programs and whether remediation measures including summer school and additional instruction in reading and math are needed.

A passing score is based on the statewide standards, which define what students should know and be able to do, and contain skills that most eighth grade students should be able to master.

Math tests require students to understand mathematics through pre-algebra. Reading tests require students to be able to read at a degree of difficulty equal to popular adult nonfiction. The department anticipates requiring ninth grade students in the 1996-1997 school year to successfully answer 70 percent of all test items to receive a passing score, and increasing the passing score by five percent per year so that ninth grade students in the 1998-1999 school year must successfully answer 80 percent of all test items to pass.

The board expects to implement the writing portion of the rule during the 1997-1998 school year.

The department has already field-tested many writing-related items. The department anticipates that the writing test will require tenth grade students to respond to an adult reader in writing with short answers to two statements or requests for information. At least two trained readers/scorers employed by an independent scoring company will score each student's responses based upon the clarity of the idea, the amount of support given the idea, and appropriate use of language mechanics. If the two readers' scores on a student's responses differ greatly, a third reader will read the responses.

The department anticipates implementing the profile of learning in three phases over three years beginning in the 1996-1997 school year.

The profile of learning is composed of ten broadly defined elements of learning: reading, viewing and listening (element 1), writing and speaking (element 2), using and interpreting arts (element 3), solving math problems (element 4), making inquiries (element 5),

understanding science (element 6), understanding people and cultures (element 7), making decisions (element 8), managing resources (element 9), and learning another language (element 10). The profile of learning contains 62 corresponding content standards that students must try to attain at the high school, middle or intermediate, and primary levels. The department anticipates that the rule will require students to work on at least 17 standards in nine of the ten elements; element 10, which involves learning a foreign language, is optional.

At a minimum, district pilot sites[8] throughout the state are implementing the first of three phases. Phase one, which contains element 5, has three categories of inquiry involving published sources, scientific methods and data gathering and will be implemented during the 1996-1998 school years. Phase two, which contains elements 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9, will be implemented during the 1997-2000 school years. Phase three, which contains elements 1, 2, 3, and 10, will be implemented during the 1998-2002 school years. The board is recommending that districts implement developmental standards and assessments in the third, fifth and eighth grades that are consistent with profile of learning standards applicable to high school students.

A separate information brief for easy reference, **Profile of Learning for the State's High School Graduation Rule**, charts the ten elements, their 62 corresponding content standards for high school, and the school years during which the elements and standards will be implemented.

Poverty-related factors will be integrated into reporting data on student performance levels[9]

State statute requires the board and the department, with the assistance of other participants, to establish policies and processes for educational accountability and public reporting. The commissioner must aggregate student performance data at the district, regional or statewide level and, when disseminating the aggregated data, acknowledge the impact of significant demographic factors that strongly correlate with student performance levels. The department anticipates correlating student performance levels with a number of poverty-related factors, including schools' free and reduced lunch count, number of students who pass an approved test, number of special needs students, the rate at which people move, the number of students for whom English is a second language, and the student-to-teacher or licensed adult ratio. The department also may correlate student performance levels with the length of the school day and school year and the ratio of per pupil spending to per pupil funding from state and local sources.

The statute requires the board to submit an annual report to the legislature by January 15, 1997 describing its progress in developing and implementing graduation requirements.

The state graduation standards represent the minimum knowledge and skills that each student must demonstrate to graduate.

The standards do not dictate curricula and impose few constraints on delivering instruction. Although the state determines the passing score on its competency tests, districts may impose additional local graduation requirements, and develop curricula and alternative methods of instruction. The department believes that using multiple measures of student achievement prevent teachers from teaching to the test.

Districts can choose one of three testing options: state-developed competency tests; state-approved, nationally-normed and commercially published tests; or locally-developed competency tests.

The department hires an independent contractor to determine the comparability of alternative tests based on criteria established in the rule. Districts may not use one particular form of a test more than once per three school years for the same group of students. The board annually must distribute a list of state-approved competency tests that districts may use as an alternative to the state-developed tests. The department currently has approved at least 15 alternative tests.

A statewide accountability system will be a part of the rule.

The legislature directed the department to contract with the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota to complete a $120,000 feasibility and design study on statewide educational accountability. The purpose of developing and implementing a statewide accountability system is to promote annual public reporting on the health of Minnesota schools and school districts. The research team scheduled sessions with numerous education constituencies throughout the state to identify and reach consensus on input, process and outcome variables to include in an educational accountability model. To build its model, the college anticipates using 20 to 40 specific variables that the constituencies identify. The college expects that the model it designs will change as conditions within the state change, and allow for new information as it becomes available. A report on the study should be available December 1996.

Endnotes

1. In 1976, in an earlier effort to introduce accountability into elementary and secondary public education and retain local control of the schools, the legislature enacted the planning, evaluating and reporting (PER) law. The law required school districts, with local input, to review curriculum, instruction and assessment over a six year cycle and use the results of the review to improve education. Beginning in 1989, as an additional accountability measure, the legislature made available to districts assurance of mastery revenue for the purpose of providing direct instructional services to at-risk students. The legislature repealed the PER law effective August 1, 1996, and substituted a similar school district process for improving instruction and curriculum.

2. See **Proposals to Amend the High School Graduation Rule**, December 1992, House Research Department.

3. Minnesota Laws 1992, chapter 499, article 8, sections 32 and 33.

4. Minnesota Statutes, section 121.11, subdivision 7c.

5. In 1995, in preparing the statement of need and reasonableness for the first phase of the rule, the state Board of Education proposed that students demonstrate minimum competency in reading, mathematics, writing, science, government, physical education and safety, and geography as a condition of receiving a high school diploma.

6. In 1995, in preparing the statement of need and reasonableness for the first phase of the rule, the state Board of Education proposed that the rigorous standards represented by the profile of learning require students to demonstrate work in: reading, viewing and listening; writing and speaking; using and interpreting arts; solving math problems; making inquiries; understanding science; understanding people and cultures; making decisions; and managing resources. A tenth element, learning another language, likely will be optional.

7. The Department of Children, Families and Learning expects that 85 percent of the state's special education population can pass the reading and mathematics tests at the state level.

8. Tier I pilot sites include Annandale public schools, Brainerd public schools, Freshwater education district, Minnesota Center for Student Performance, Moorhead public schools, Robbinsdale area public schools, Anoka-Hennepin public schools, Dover-Eyota public schools, Minnesota Center for Arts Education, Minnesota River Valley education district, Richfield public schools, and St. Cloud Community schools. Tier II pilot sites include Caledonia public schools, Elk River public schools, Mahnomen public schools, Morris public schools, St. Paul public schools, Wadena-Deer Creek public schools, Duluth public schools, Lake of the Woods public schools, Minneapolis public schools, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan public schools, St. Peter public schools, and Willmar public schools.

9. Under Minnesota Statutes, section 121.1115, subdivision 2, the Commissioner of Children, Families and Learning must integrate demographic factors that strongly correlate with student performance when aggregating and reporting student performance levels over time.